

DREAD SPACE

A new Ripley rises to face the Alien horror we've been waiting for

Not content to simply redeem the *Alien* series in the wake of the ill-received *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, Creative Assembly aims to return the survival-horror genre to its nerve-fraying roots with **Alien: Isolation** — an entry more inspired by Ridley Scott's original sci-fi scare-fest than James Cameron's pulse rifle-packing follow-up. BY MATT CABRAL

• FOR XBOX 360, XBOX ONE • PUBLISHER SEGA • DEVELOPER CREATIVE ASSEMBLY • MULTIPLAYER NONE

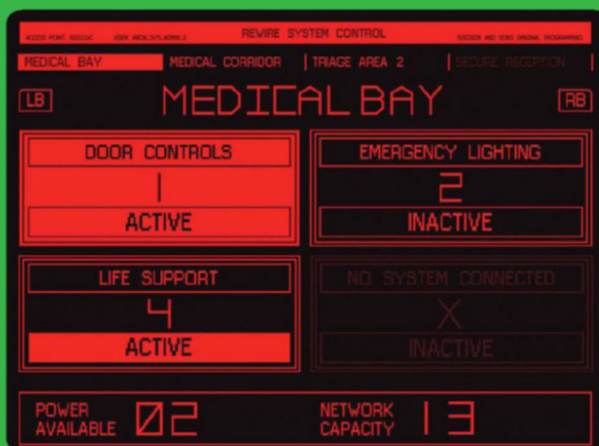




No one will hear you, but you'll still be screaming your head off every time you see this set of drool-dripping choppers.

Sci-Fi, 70s Style

Creative Assembly refers to *Isolation*'s take on the future as "lo-fi sci-fi," an aesthetic that favors practical tools over flashy tech. Based on *Alien*'s concept art, the game's "futuristic" technology is defined by chunky push-buttons and clunky terminals rather than holograms and *Minority Report*-like touchscreens. From environments and tools to character costumes and computers, there's nothing in the game that would look out of place in the original film.



Put in a predicament as daunting as encountering a terrifying extraterrestrial on a derelict spaceship, the U.K.-based developer has the nerve-racking job of creating a new *Alien* game following the massive stink caused by last year's hugely disappointing *Colonial Marines*. However, the studio behind Sega's forthcoming *Isolation* feels more redeemed than frightened by the overwhelmingly negative feedback garnered by Gearbox Software's franchise-tarnishing first-person shooter. "When people were talking about what they really wanted from an *Alien* game, so

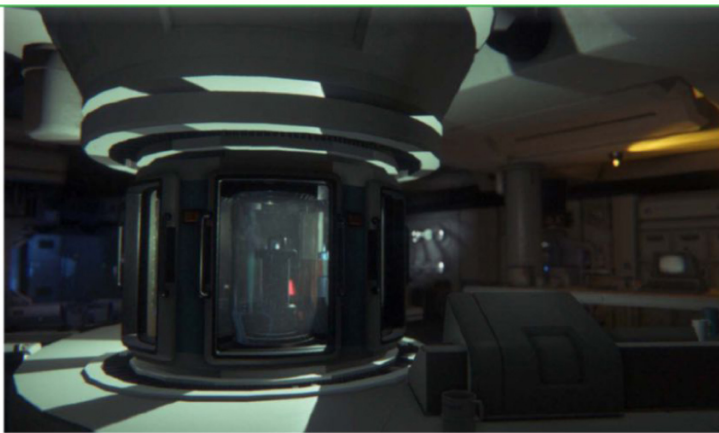
much of it was describing what we were already making; we wanted to tell them 'that's the game we're making, guys!'" explains lead producer Jonathan Court.

Equally enthusiastic to finally peel the face-hugger off the secret project, design lead Clive Lindop elaborates: "The fan feedback really demonstrated that there's still an audience that cares passionately about what they're hearing and seeing...they clearly have high expectations of what they want and we have high expectations of what we want to build. It felt like we've spent

the entirety of the last three years going down the right road." That road, as it turns out, leads to a complete 180 from what Gearbox attempted with its undercooked, co-op-focused frag-fest.

SCI-FI MEETS SURVIVAL-HORROR

You see, more than just *not* being *Colonial Marines*, *Isolation* isn't a shooter at all, nor is it like any *Alien* game that's come before it. Court continues: "We're making such a different game. It's the first time someone's gone back to that original theme, the haunted house in space."



ABOVE *Isolation*'s minimalistic, near-monochromatic environments are heavily inspired by the original film's creepy, claustrophobic sets. **RIGHT** As if you didn't already feel pretty adrift in the vacuum of space, concept art of the station you're on shows just how far from any discernible emergency help you actually are.



Defined by clunky CRT terminals, large blinking lights, and beefy buttons, *Isolation*'s futuristic hardware is a far cry from the flashy tech you've seen in *Halo* or *Mass Effect*.



Court is, of course, referring to director Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi horror classic *Alien*. Drawing inspiration from the film that spawned the tagline "In space, no one can hear you scream" means making a game that's more focused on messing with players' minds than taxing their trigger fingers. *Isolation* is, in fact, a survival-horror entry or, as creative lead Alistair Hope cleverly calls it, "a survival-horror game based on the *original* survival-horror."

Like Scott's chest-bursting benchmark, *Isolation* has no pulse rifles. But even if it did, there'd be no swarms of bullet-sponging Xenomorphs to unleash them on. As Amanda — Ellen Ripley's twenty-something daughter — you'll face "only" one of the titular terrors while on a quest to discover what happened to her mother. Hope — who boils the game's frights-over-firefights formula to "you, an alien, and a motion tracker" — explains the philosophy behind his team's single-alien approach to survival-horror: "It's

the *Alien* game that goes back to the roots of the original series, but featuring a new story with an underprepared and underpowered character facing overwhelming odds. We wanted to focus on Amanda's interaction with a single creature...pit the player against this terrifying beast and see how they'd survive."

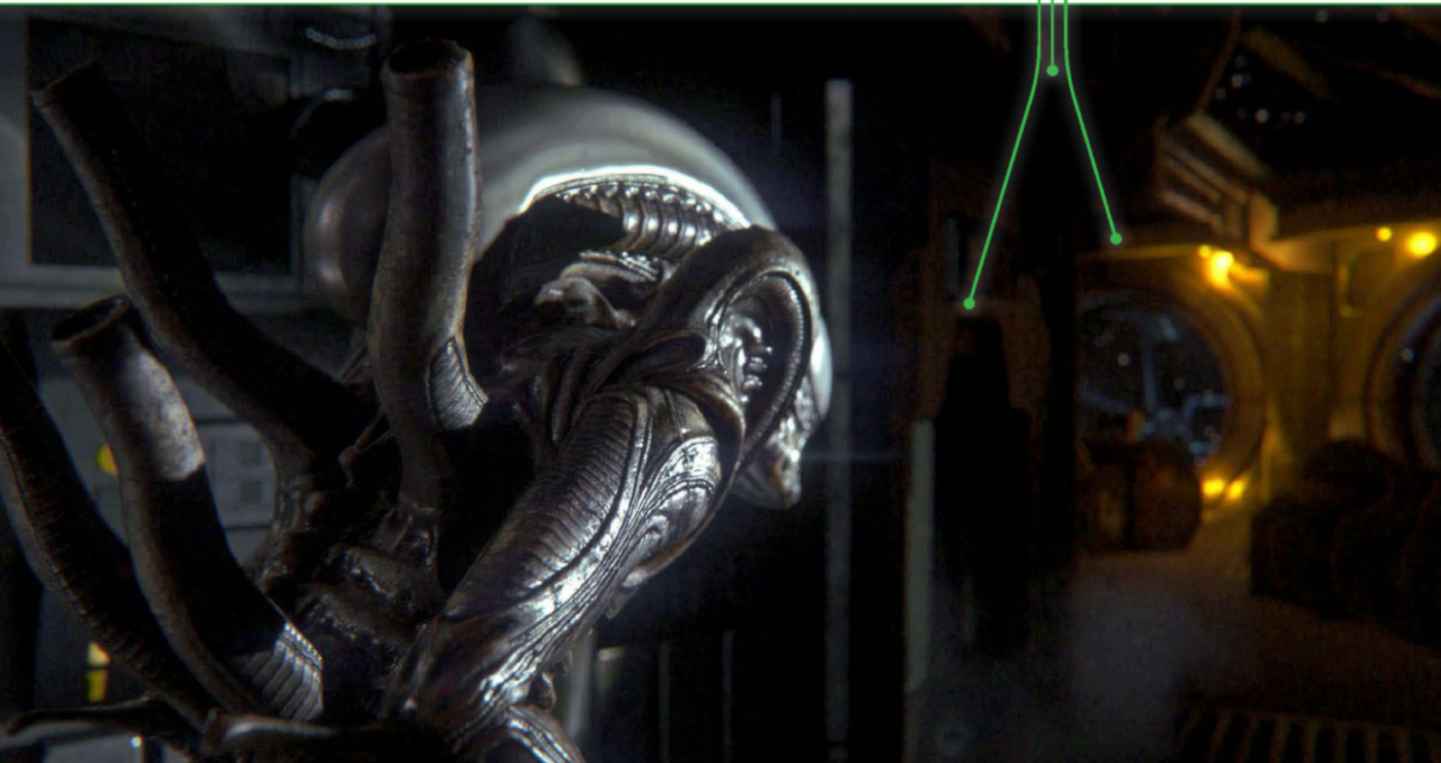
(TREMBLING) HANDS-ON

We become Hope's nervous guinea pig during our 30 or so minutes of hands-on time with *Isolation*. Unfolding around the story's halfway point, the demo drops us in a seemingly abandoned space station; the first sound we hear is Amanda's belabored breathing, soon followed by an unsettling symphony of sirens, alarms, and malfunctioning equipment that's apparently signaling the doomed craft's rapidly decaying state.

As we navigate narrow corridors, tight tunnels, and other claustrophobia-inducing environments, the chaotic chorus is occasionally

interrupted by the jarring thud of a closing bay door or a helpful voice on the other end of our com. There are moments of complete quiet — save for the sound of a whipping fan blade or the rhythmic "dipping" of one of those drinking-bird toys — but the silence, somehow, is even more unnerving. Our eyes are trained on Amanda's motion tracker, but even that's not forthcoming at the moment.

Flashing emergency alarms and flickering CRT terminals provide some illumination, but we mostly rely on a flashlight to lead us. Its beam isn't so welcome, however, when it lands on the halved body of an android, milky-white innards spilled from its midsection. After collecting some resources, such as "scrap" and "explosives," utilizing a torch to restore power, and completing a simple hacking minigame, we're properly spooked, but several steps closer to safety. That is, until a collapsing ceiling in front of the work station we're standing behind



ABOVE The survival-horror gameplay is all about ducking and hiding, especially when the single, titular threat shows its ugly mug. **BELOW** Your motion tracker almost makes the action even more dread-inducing.



Androids wouldn't be half as creepy if they just bled red plasma like everyone else.



precedes the arrival of what Hope calls "the ultimate killer."

As we frantically duck beneath the desk, a segmented, scaly, spiked tail slithers over its surface, and so begins our game of cat and mouse with one of science fiction's most frightening monsters. Standing up for a closer look brings immediate death. While waiting for the checkpoint to reload, we scan the controls tip sheet provided by the studio, only to realize there's no "shoot" command anywhere on it (oh right, not a shooter). The right trigger is labeled "melee," a move we don't dare test at the moment. There are inputs for sprinting, crouching,

and peeking, all of which, when haphazardly executed, serve to get us killed. Leveraged strategically, though, these moves — coupled with the motion tracker's rough estimate of our enemy's location — eventually put us a fair distance from the creature.

Now just outside the lab where we had our first close encounter with the Xenomorph's acid-dripping maw, we slowly make our way to an airlock that should see us to relative safety. Having lost the alien's exact location, we alternate between frantically following the tiny dot on our motion tracker's display and wondering if every random audio cue and cast shadow is actually a

precursor to the hunter finding its prey.

With the door a good distance away, but in our direct line of sight, we hastily make a break for it. We reach our destination, but aren't able to activate its switch before we're once again shish-ka-bobbed by the Xeno's piercing tail. On our next attempt, we avoid the sprint button and slowly sneak to the door; as the sound of thundering footfalls rapidly escalates in our wake, we don't look back but instead fumble for the door's control panel. Expecting to again peer down at an alien appendage skewering our stomach, we're surprised — and relieved — to find ourselves on the safe side of the airlock.



ABOVE Like any good horror title worth its weight in soiled undies, *Isolation* relies heavily on atmospheric lighting and audio effects.



A.I. (Alien Intelligence)

A big part of *Isolation*'s fright-factor comes from the alien's programming or, more accurately, its lack thereof. Unrestricted by predictable patterns, the space beast's behavior is dynamic and sense-driven; reacting to light and sound, its actions and resulting outcomes are often driven by what your character is doing. In other words, tread softly and use your flashlight sparingly lest you wind up a Xenomorph snack.

Terrifying Tale

Set up as more of a gap-filling side-story than sequel, *Isolation* picks up fifteen years after the Nostromo self-destructed at the end of *Alien*. As Ellen Ripley's daughter, Amanda, you're recruited by Weyland-Yutani to recover the craft's flight recorder from a remote space station. Eager to discover what happened to her mother, Amanda accepts the assignment but is cut off from her crew when, according to Lindop, "something terrible happens," leaving her to brave the creepy space station by herself.

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE, CAN KILL YOU

With our demo concluded and blood pressure back to normal, we sit down with Hope and Lindop to dig a bit deeper and discover how the game attempts to capture the sort of raw horror vibe we haven't felt since that virally infected canine came crashing through *Resident Evil*'s mansion window. According to Hope, it's all about making the alien — a foe that's essentially been reduced to bullet fodder in past *Alien* games — scary again. "We want to take you back to what it would be like to be confronted by Ridley Scott's original alien — a huge, terrifying creature that looks down on the player...not something that scuttles around on the floor."

Citing examples of other "low frequency, high impact" villains, such as Hannibal Lecter and *Jaws*' finned foe, Hope also stresses the importance of using the alien sparingly. "You know it's there, but not necessarily in the frame. It's about the anticipation and tension, the apprehension

of when it'll next appear...and when [it] does, it's very explosive and very meaningful."

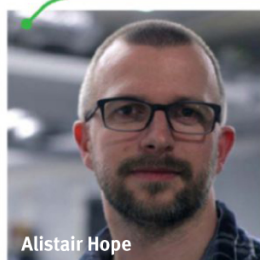
Planting the seeds of our future nightmares, Lindop runs with Hope's point: "Although [the alien] may not be physically present, right next to you, the threat of its presence is always there, especially when you learn there's kind of a relationship between it hunting and what attracts it and how you can cause that to occur. There's a certain degree of omnipresence throughout, even if [the creature's] not constantly in your face."

Despite the alien's limited screen time in our demo, it did indeed manage to scare us much more than the over-the-top monsters of recent so-called survival-horror games like *Dead Space 3* and *Resident Evil 6*. According to Lindop — who asserts *Isolation*'s old-school approach is integral to crafting an experience that shares more with Scott's slow-burn original, than Cameron's action-ratcheting sequel — that's no accident. "The survival-horror genre has

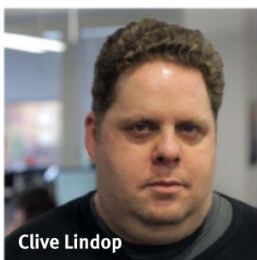
kind of drifted into action-adventure in the last 10 years. When we talk about survival-horror, though, we emphasize the survival...using your wits and instincts...and the horror. It's really kind of classic survival-horror. It's about being underpowered, being the prey, trying to survive the situation; it's not about packing the screen with action every five seconds and blowing something up."

CRAZIES AND CRAFTING

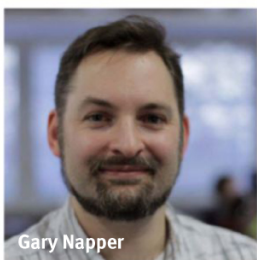
While pairing cinema's most menacing E.T. with classic survival-horror scares seems like a match made in deep space, we do wonder how this strict focus on one-on-one encounters with a single enemy can sustain an entire single-player, story-driven campaign. Our demo, as effective as it was at spiking our pulse and packing our subconscious with plenty of nightmare fodder, represented only a small slice of the overall experience. Are there any other threats in



Alistair Hope



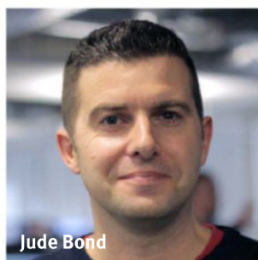
Clive Lindop



Gary Napper

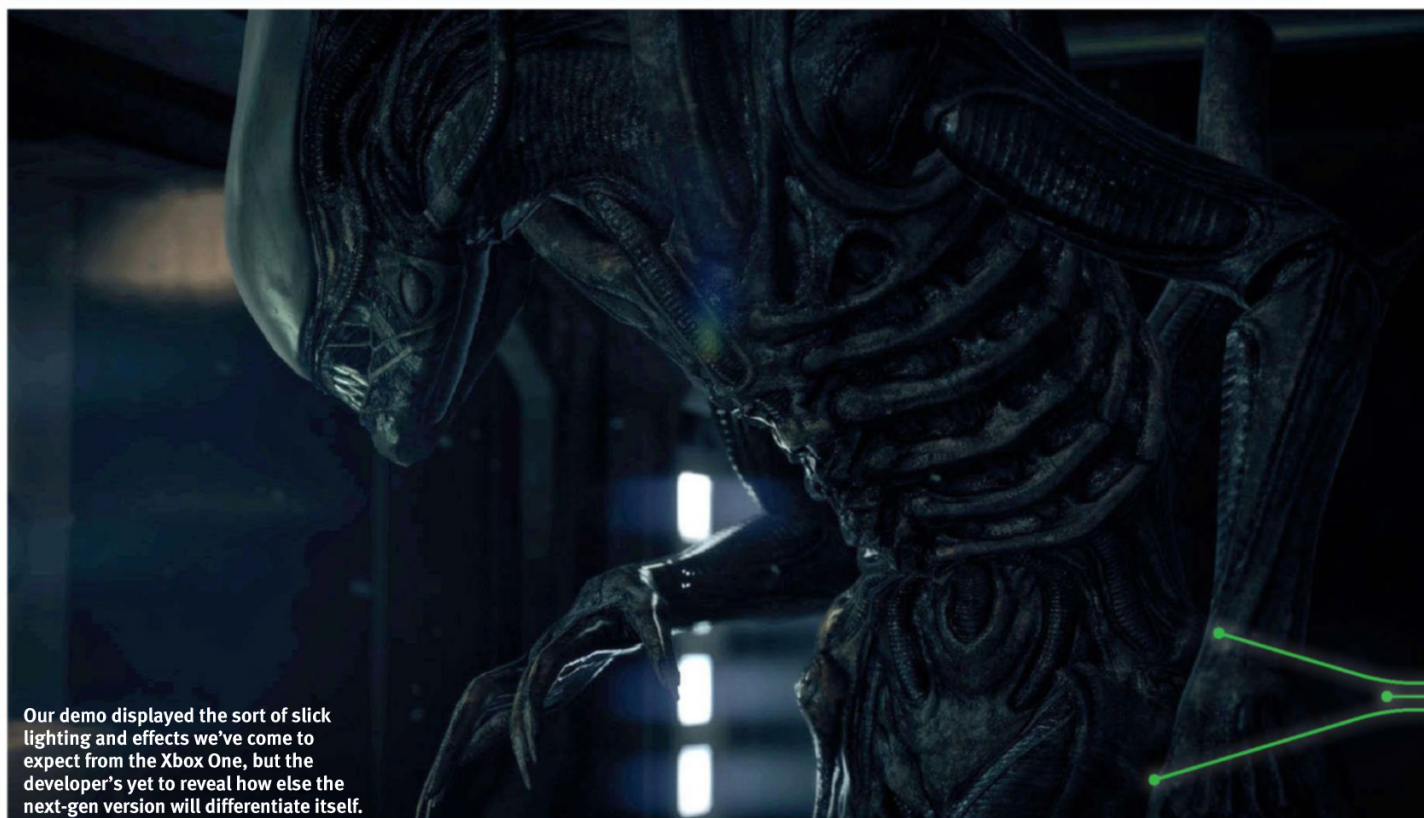


Jonathan Court



Jude Bond

ABOVE Don't let the smiling faces of the *Isolation* team fool you; overseen by CA lead Hope, they're really only interested in scaring you senseless.



Our demo displayed the sort of slick lighting and effects we've come to expect from the Xbox One, but the developer's yet to reveal how else the next-gen version will differentiate itself.

the game, human or otherworldly? What will fill our time when we're not playing hide-and-seek with a creature that'd like to floss its teeth with our spines?

When posed with such questions, Hope and Lindop become as cagey as Weyland-Yutani executives, offering only hints and teasers. "You're in an environment that's in desperate anarchy. There are people who live on the station, operate the station, and are desperate to survive and get off the station. You're going to come across other occupants of the station and you're not entirely sure who they are, whether or not you can trust them, what interactions you're going to have with them. It's about real people in extraordinary situations. There are other dangers that are represented by more mundane sources," says Lindop. While his response doesn't go into specifics, references to other survivors' desperate states certainly seems like code for "you're gonna meet some unfriendly crazies."

In terms of gameplay systems and mechanics, Hope provides another piece of a puzzle that first presented itself when we picked up scrap and explosives during the demo. "Survival horror is quite often about your resources, what you have in hand and what you do with them. So there is an element of crafting and choices of how you decide to use the things you've found. You can use things in a variety of ways to help you gain an edge. In different situations, you'll need different things at different times."

While Hope concedes there's no RPG-flavored character customization or growth, he promises this crafting system will offer some sense of progression. And while we won't be arming ourselves with any pulse rifles, Hope offers this to fans who feel more comfortable with a good blaster by their side: "*Isolation* is by no means a shooter, but there are weapons in the game. Like any other resource, though, they're

very scarce and not very effective."

Based on our brief but scary playtime, and the developer's ambitious ideas for crafting an alien that's as interested in chilling spines as it is ripping them from its prey's back, we're hopeful about *Isolation*'s potential to not only redeem the franchise, but also deliver a survival-horror experience the likes of which we haven't seen since Isaac Clarke set foot on the *USG Ishimura*. Toss in a strong female lead — with Ellen Ripley's DNA, no less — and a promising side story that's tied to but not creatively restricted by existing canon, and we start to think of *Colonial Marines* as nothing but a smudge in the rear-view mirror. Maybe.

Questions and concerns remain, but our teasing taste of *Isolation* has, at the very least, earned Sega a do-over, a second chance to properly bring this beloved sci-fi series to the interactive medium...and scare our pants off in the process. 🍄

SIZE MATTERS: Environments are based on the scale of the original film's sets, but the alien's been upped to 9.5 feet to emphasize the contrast between its menacing presence and the claustrophobic surroundings.